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## The Program For Improving Students' Use of English At the University of Illinois<sup>1</sup>

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In the fall of 1940, upon the request of its Board of Trustees, the University of Illinois began a consideration of the problem of how to improve students' use of English. Since that time many studies have been made of the problem, a Senate Committee on Student English has been established, a Writing Clinic has been placed in operation, a number of new regulations have been put into effect, and provision has been made for obtaining the co-operation of all staff members in improving student English. This article presents a brief statement of the program as it has developed so far and of the basis upon which it rests.

Early in the consideration of the problem, surveys were made of articles in professional journals which deal with freshman college rhetoric and of the ways in which more than four hundred colleges and universities handle the problem of student English.<sup>2</sup> Questionnaire studies were conducted on the teaching of English in the high schools of the state of Illinois,<sup>3</sup> and a statistical anal-

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from *College English*, Vol. 7, No. 3, December, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Jessie Howard and Charles W. Roberts, *The Problem of English Composition in American Colleges and Universities* (University of Illinois Bull., Vol. XXXVIII, No. 48 [July 22, 1941]). Pp. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Edward F. Potthoff, "The Teaching of English Composition in the High Schools of Illinois," *Illinois English Bulletin*, XXXI, No. 1 (October, 1941), 1-15, and "The Problem of Teaching Youth to Use the English Language Effectively," *Ibid.*, No. 2 (November, 1941), 7-11.

ysis was made of the academic progress and records in the University of Illinois of all students in an entering class whose performances in the first required rhetoric course were unsatisfactory. An inquiry was addressed to the heads of all university departments to determine the extent to which, in their opinion, graduates of the institution had a command of English which was inadequate to their professional needs. Another inquiry, addressed to a large number of personnel officers and executives of business concerns which employ many college graduates, was designed to determine the types of deficiency which such employees exhibit in their use of English. Analyses were also made of the quality of writing which students, particularly upperclassmen, exhibit in examination papers, reports, and other written materials.<sup>4</sup>

These studies and others made it clear that large proportions of college graduates and of upperclassmen are deficient in their use of English and that steps should be taken to remedy the situation. A survey of the university faculty in 1941 showed that 85 per cent of those who responded voted in the affirmative on the question "Do you favor making a satisfactory proficiency in English (by whatever method to be determined) a requirement for graduation?" The program now in effect includes such a requirement with respect to the use of written English, and students' proficiency in oral expression is being studied in order to determine what measures need to be taken in this area.

The program relative to written English was designed for the purpose of assuring that students who receive undergraduate degrees from the university have a satisfactory proficiency in everyday writing. By this is meant that their written expression should (1) be reasonably free from faults and errors in spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, grammar, sentence structure, and diction; (2) be clear, accurate, unambiguous, and coherent; (3) be properly planned with respect to relationships among details, organization of paragraphs, and development of a well-defined thesis; and (4) avoid verbosity, omit extraneous materials, and include necessary details. These specifications are intended to place the emphasis upon actual skill in written expression and the thinking which is basic to it, rather than upon technical knowledge of the rules and principles of language and composition.

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<sup>4</sup>H. N. Hillebrand, W. F. Ekstrom, J. N. Hook, Jessie Howard, and E. F. Potthoff, "The Quality of Students' Writing as Revealed by Final Examination Papers" (University of Illinois, May, 1940). Pp. 34. (Mimeographed.)



As the initial step in the program, all entering freshmen are given a placement test at the beginning of their first semester in the university to determine whether they are qualified to enter the required rhetoric course (Rhetoric 1).<sup>5</sup> Those who fail are not allowed to register in this course, but they must qualify for it either by passing a three-hour noncredit elective course (Rhetoric 0) or by repeating and passing the placement examination. If they have not qualified by the beginning of their third semester, they must withdraw from the university until they show, by passing the test, that they are ready for Rhetoric 1.

Rhetoric 0, which is an elective course, does not grant credit. Students who demonstrate during their first three weeks in the course that they are properly qualified for Rhetoric 1 are transferred to the latter course at the end of that time. This procedure guards against mistakes in grading the placement tests. Students who complete Rhetoric 0 and pass the course are regarded as having qualified for Rhetoric 1; those who fail must repeat either Rhetoric 0 or the placement test. Students who do not elect Rhetoric 0 may make up their deficiency by tutoring, correspondence study, or in any way they choose; but they are advised to follow some systematic plan of preparing for the examination, which is given at the beginning and end of each semester.

In order that Rhetoric 1 and 2, the required freshman work, may make a maximum contribution to improving students' use of English, the attention in these courses has been centered on the fundamentals of correct expression. Considerable training in using oral English in the everyday situations of life has been introduced, and the basic textbooks have been changed from technical and literary discussions of the niceties of artistic expression to practical treatments of the basic essentials of composition. A system of proficiency examinations enables students who already have the required degree of skill in the use of English to obtain credit for either or both of the freshman courses without taking them. Students who fail Rhetoric 1 or 2 must repeat the course.

The Committee on Student English gave careful consideration to numerous problems in the staffing and instruction of the required rhetoric courses. Several studies were made of the local situation and of practices in other institutions. The committee has presented to the department of English a series of recommendations which are designed to increase the tenure, maturity,

<sup>5</sup> See Cornelia P. Kelly and Charles W. Roberts, "Rhetoric Proficiency Tests at the University of Illinois," *Illinois English Bulletin*, Vol. XXXI, No. 6 (March, 1944). Pp. 1-24.

and competence of the rhetoric staff and to create a more favorable "atmosphere" for teaching and advanced (graduate) study in the field of English language and composition. These recommendations, which relate to the selection and training of new members of the rhetoric staff, to salaries, salary increases, and opportunities for advancement in rank for members of the staff, and to provisions for graduate study in English language and composition are intended to bring about much more favorable conditions for the pursuit of rhetoric teaching as a field of professional endeavor.

Studies of the writing of university upperclassmen showed that many students who receive a grade of D in Rhetoric 2, the second semester of the required course, write satisfactorily later; that is, improvement takes place. And, on the other hand, some students who receive a grade of C in the course may later write unsatisfactorily; that is, retrogression occurs. In general, the data showed that, although grades of A or B in Rhetoric 2 almost invariably forecast satisfactory writing later, grades of C or D are not sufficiently reliable indexes of what students' subsequent upperclass proficiency in English will be.

The Committee on Student English therefore considered various procedures which may be used for discovering the upperclassmen whose writing is unsatisfactory, such as a written examination given for that specific purpose, an analysis of student papers prepared in various courses, and the method of having instructors report to a central office any student whose writing they consider deficient. In view of the available evidence, the best method seemed to be that of a written examination; it is the most equitable and straightforward of all the procedures, and it has fewer serious shortcomings than either of the others.

The chief limitations of the examination method are (1) that, if students who already are very proficient in the use of English are required to take the test for upperclassmen, they may regard it as an imposition and (2) that staff members will find the reading and evaluation of the papers a time-consuming process. The data already cited, however, indicate that students who receive grades of A or B in Rhetoric 2 will continue to write satisfactorily while in the university and therefore need not be subjected to such an examination. Exempting them reduces the total number of papers by 40 per cent and therefore greatly lightens the burden of grading papers; at the same time, it gives due recognition to the most deserving students, namely, those who



are already very proficient in the use of English. Moreover, such a system of exemptions should have a considerable motivating effect upon many students who might ordinarily receive grades of C or D in Rhetoric 2.

In view of the foregoing facts, a satisfactory proficiency in the use of written English was made a requirement for all undergraduate degrees awarded by the Urbana divisions of the university; and in order to assure such proficiency, all undergraduates who pass the Rhetoric 2 course, or the equivalent, with a grade of C or D, or the equivalent, are required to take an English qualifying examination before graduating. Students who pass the examination are regarded as having met the graduation requirement; those who fail must take an extra one-semester course in rhetoric (Rhetoric 5). Those who fail Rhetoric 5 must repeat either this course or the qualifying examination, a passing grade in either case being prerequisite to graduation.

The qualifying examination occupies a three-hour period; the first hour consists of a test on the mechanics of expression, and the last two hours are devoted to the composition of a theme which is mainly expository in character. The test on mechanics requires students to indicate the points in a list of sentences in which errors in grammatical usage occur, to select the proper punctuation marks for another group of sentences, to designate words which require capitalizing, and to detect misspelled words. The theme, which is expected to be from five hundred to seven hundred words in length, is written upon a topic chosen by the student from a long list of subjects supplied at the time of the examination.

Since an additional rhetoric course is required of students who fail the qualifying examination, it must be given early enough to permit them to take this course — and even to repeat it, if necessary — before they reach the end of their senior year. But, on the other hand, since the quality of some students' writing may undergo considerable improvement or deterioration after they complete Rhetoric 2, the examination should not be placed at too early a point in their university careers. The examination is therefore normally required at the end of the sophomore year, except that at least one semester must have elapsed since the student received credit in Rhetoric 2. The interval between this course and the examination gives the student time to make whatever preparation he may wish for the test and provides a period during which he is likely to exert at least some effort to maintain, if not to improve, his writing proficiency.

The Committee on Student English is in general charge of the qualifying examination but has the assistance of carefully selected members of the rhetoric division in preparing the questions and in grading the papers. Each theme written on the second part of the test is appraised by at least two readers. The individual schools and colleges of the university decide at what point those students who fail the examination shall take Rhetoric 5, but the general policy is to require this course as soon as possible.

Rhetoric 5, which gives three hours' credit, is designed as a remedial course covering the essentials of college rhetoric, its general purpose being to enable students to attain the level of writing proficiency required for graduation from the university. In order that the grades assigned in the course may be directly indicative of this proficiency and place the emphasis upon its attainment, they are based entirely upon students' performance in the final examination, which is equivalent in every respect to the qualifying examination.

It will be noted from the foregoing that a student whose writing is unsatisfactory passes through a series of steps in which his deficiency may repeatedly come to light. Moreover, the values of proficiency in written English, together with the consequences of his failure to attain it, are pointed out to him at each step. The emphasis throughout is placed upon the importance of the students' acquiring and maintaining a certain level of skill in writing rather than upon merely passing another examination or taking an additional course.

A Writing Clinic was established, on an experimental basis, by the rhetoric division in the fall of 1944. This clinic, which is open on a purely voluntary basis to any student in the university, is designed to analyze the writing difficulties which he encounters, to provide the advice necessary for him to remedy them under his own "power," and to determine the effectiveness of his remedial efforts. In general, the clinic seeks to help the student up to the point where he can exercise intelligent self-direction in overcoming his difficulties; it does not supervise writing or provide tutoring. The clinic was established partly in order that students who have difficulty in meeting the graduation requirement already discussed would have no ground for objecting that the various facilities necessary to enable them to meet it are not available to them. A Speech Clinic, maintained to help students in correcting speech defects, has been in operation for a number of years.



From the outset of the study of the problem it has been recognized that success in improving students' use of English is dependent upon the willingness of the entire faculty of the university to accept a share of the responsibility. But effective faculty co-operation cannot be achieved simply through an act of legislation; it can best be attained if a program of definite co-operative activities in which individual staff members can engage is designed and if the machinery necessary to stimulate such faculty participation is established.

In view of these facts, the Committee on Student English obtained authorization to plan and initiate a program of faculty participation. This program contemplates that a staff member may co-operate in such ways as impressing upon students the importance of proficiency in the use of English, providing them with frequent opportunities for using it, checking the quality of their English and insisting upon high standards in its use, referring students to the sources of aid available in seeking improvement, and acquainting them with exemplary writings in his own field of specialization. These types of faculty activities, however, may require analysis into more specific procedures or provision of special materials, and the Committee on Student English is responsible for meeting these needs.

The committee was so organized that it contains a representative from each of the undergraduate colleges and schools of the university. This representative serves as a liaison officer between the committee and the division to which he belongs; he is charged not only with representing that division but also with effectuating in it the plans made by the committee for obtaining faculty co-operation. The committee is authorized to have each of its members solicit the assistance of the dean or director, the department heads, and any appropriate committee of his college or school in interesting and informing faculty members with respect to the program of co-operative activities. Such co-operation is regarded as one of the most important and essential steps in solving the problem of improving students' use of English.

Finally, the Committee on Student English has recognized that it still faces a very large number of problems which represent a research program of considerable magnitude and complexity. Many of these problems can properly be investigated only by an expert or by a number of them working together. The committee has, therefore, recommended that it be authorized to establish, with the co-operation of the rhetoric division, a Joint Commission

on Research in Student English, whose function it would be to plan and conduct studies useful in making further recommendations for the improvement of students' use of English. The establishment of the Research Commission will round out a comprehensive program in student English, except as studies still to be completed may lead to requirements relative to proficiency in oral expression. The effectiveness of the program has not yet been determined, however; hence it is subject to modification in the light of future studies, particularly those of the Research Commission.



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